

Kim Il-song

The Koreans

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This issue of the Journal addresses Korea. The massive preparation for Kim Il-song's 70th birthday next month and Kim's plan to have his son succeed him point to an era of transition in North Korea. The uncertainties and potential opportunities flowing from this evolution—combined with the intractable nature of many of the problems on the peninsula—will make Korea an issue of concern for the foreseeable future.

and is routinely on wartime footing

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As Kim Il-song reviews the massive parades from his rostrum on 15 April, he will take pride from the progress North Korea has achieved under his leadership. While building a formidable military machine, North Korea has become nearly self-sufficient in agriculture and has made impressive gains in industry. It nonetheless continues to face serious economic shortcomings—including financial default—and relations with Moscow and Beijing are, at best, restrained. Kim must also regret his failure to achieve unification and the loss of momentum in his diplomatic competition with the South

Kim's objective in developing this military machine is to preserve independence and improve his ability to intervene in the South. But his willingness to take the initiative appears largely conditioned on a substantial breakdown of internal cohesion in the ROK, coupled with some evident weakening of US commitments to South Korea. Kim nonetheless failed to intervene in the South in 1960 and again in 1979-80 when transitions in leadership threatened stability. Recent extensive mobilization exercises in the North may reflect a determination to be better prepared for another opportunity though they also are logical steps in P'yongyang's military modernization program.

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Subsequent events have not been favorable to the North. The US military presence has been reaffirmed and augmented, and the ROK Government now appears firmly in control. President Chun Doo Hwan's authoritarianism is accepted, if grudgingly, by most South Koreans. While he faces economic difficulties and potential unrest from students his grip on power seems secure, although P'yongyang may still nurture hopes that serious opposition will arise

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The intensity of the campaign to legitimize his son as his political heir may in part reflect Kim's concern that the goals he has set for his nation will not be fulfilled in his lifetime and can only be carried on by someone closely identified with him and committed to the preservation of his cult. But the son is not the father. When he receives the mantle of leadership, Kim Chong-il must contend with a tide of events running against the North and with elements within the hierarchy less subservient to him than to his father.

For Kim Il-song, who has ruled North Korea for over 35 years, unification is the touchstone of his ideological system. With an eye to achieving this goal through whatever means necessary, he has subordinated economic growth to the development of substantial military force. Society in the North has been regimented

To bolster his image at home Chun has also emphasized reunification—an issue that evokes considerable emotion in all Koreans, particularly the millions who fled south during the Korean war. In a speech to the National Assembly on 22 January, Chun set forth the most detailed and flexible proposal on this issue the ROK has ever offered. Chun's effort appears genuine and intended to probe the North for some sign of flexibility on its part that could ultimately lead to

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EA EAJ 82-005
3 March 1982

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dialogue and some reduction of tension between the two states. But Seoul was also using the occasion to demonstrate that it now holds the initiative on this issue after so many years of reacting to North Korean proposals [redacted]

If P'yongyang is frustrated with the recent turn of events, it is not apparent, perhaps partly because of its preoccupation with internal developments. Kim Il-song's campaign to groom his son as a replacement—under way for nearly a decade—is being stepped up. The son, Kim Chong-il, now appears more frequently and has assumed greater responsibility for domestic political and economic affairs. The elder Kim is not moving precipitately, however, having made a false start in the early 1970s in grooming his brother as a potential heir. The junior Kim has yet to receive foreign visitors or to deal with foreign policy issues—an area in which Kim Il-song is particularly active and, as a self-styled leader of the nonaligned movement, one in which he may wish to remain for some time. [redacted]

Whatever Kim Chong-il's new status, it is almost certain to be overshadowed by the enormous activity planned to celebrate Kim Il-song's 70th birthday. The outpouring of effort for this celebration is difficult to fathom in a country as economically pressed as North Korea. North Korean engineers have been constructing monuments similar to the Arc de Triomphe and the Washington Monument. The main streets in P'yongyang also have been widened to accommodate hundreds of thousands of parading workers. Much economic activity has been suspended so that preparations for the great event can proceed [redacted]

Large numbers of high-ranking foreign officials have been invited to P'yongyang for Kim's birthday. The North will use this as an opportunity to lobby for greater international status, particularly within the nonaligned movement. P'yongyang seems particularly intent this year in countering what it perceives as diplomatic advances made by Seoul within the non-aligned movement. South Korea's relations with

Iraq—which will soon assume the chairmanship of the nonaligned movement—are much better than the North's, and the ROK has been making headway with such erstwhile friends of P'yongyang as Egypt and Libya. Closer to home, P'yongyang has launched a major diplomatic campaign to solidify relations with Southeast Asian states where Seoul's political and economic activity and military sales have grown substantially in recent years [redacted]

On the diplomatic front P'yongyang is fighting an uphill battle. While it can take some satisfaction from the fact that it is recognized by almost as many states as Seoul, the nature of its relationship with all but a handful of Communist allies and small socialist states in Africa is limited. [redacted]

Seoul's aggressive economic policies have opened long-closed doors and have made it an increasingly active participant in the international community. The ROK has even been successful in developing an unofficial trade relationship with Beijing and has been able to establish limited political contact with the USSR. Seoul is also on the verge of securing substantial aid from Japan that would help underwrite economic expansion for the next several years. The ROK-Japanese relationship has also served as a major check on DPRK-Japanese ties, and Japan's interests in the South are likely to restrain P'yongyang's growing interest in trade with Japan, still the North's largest non-Communist trading partner [redacted]

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